

Prepare the Way – Andrew Page

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:68-79; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

This is the time of year in which we wait in anticipation, anticipation for the 25th of December. We are busy preparing during the Christmas season. Many of us are surfing Amazon buying gifts for loved ones. Others are taking the more archaic route and visiting shopping malls. Some of us, that own such things, are putting up Christmas trees, lights, and other decorations. Soon we will prepare our homes for the arrival of guests or begin packing for trips to be taken. A lot of you kids are thinking about the toys you're going to get. Maybe some of them are already under the tree and that big one in the corner has caught your eye. Maybe you have sent your letters to Santa or you got to give Santa your list in person. Whatever it is, there is a lot to do before Christmas Day. However, this is not the preparation the writer of Luke has in mind when he writes, *Prepare the way of the Lord*. Advent is a time to make preparations for the coming of Christ.

So, I begin with this question: how does one prepare for the birth of a child? Now I do not have firsthand knowledge of preparing for the birth of a child, but I am aware of a few of the things required of new parents. Parents must first acknowledge a drastic change is coming in their lives. They must then begin to make preparations for the arrival of the child. They must make room for the child. This means giving their time to the child and preparing a room for the child.

As I reflected on the idea of preparation, I naturally thought of religious icons, because I am currently working on an icon of Christ with other members of this community. Iconographers who paint the image of Christ must make preparations before that image can be written. This is an extremely time-consuming process that requires careful attention. A piece of wood, of high quality, must be chosen. After it is chosen the surface must be carefully shaped and smoothed, so there are no rough parts. This wood represents both the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. The wood is then wrapped in linen. This is to protect the wood and to represent the two times Christ was wrapped in linen—the first being at the time of Christ's birth, as he lay in the manger, and the second, after Christ's death, as he lay in the tomb. Eleven layers of gesso, a type of white glue, are then painted over the cloth. This gesso represents the soul and life of the person. The iconographer then smooths and shapes the gesso to bear the image of Christ—just as we are sanded and smoothed to bear the image of Christ. Before Christ appears on the wood it must be prepared for Christ. We too must carefully prepare ourselves for Christ.

The writer of Malachi describes the coming Lord like *a refiner's fire*. John Calvin writes, "The power of the fire, we know, is twofold: for it burns and it purifies; it burns what is corrupt; but it purifies gold and silver from the dross." When one allows Christ into their lives a change is witnessed in the person. That which is corrupt in a person is burnt away and the person is purified. Their life looks completely different. Portions of a person are killed off by the purifying fire. To accept John's message of repentance, "this willing submission, to a kind of death," is to be ready for the Messiah.

We must regularly ask ourselves, what is in need of being refined? And how do these things come to light? In my own experience the Lord's refining power has utilized honest reflection and the concerns of the community. This was how my own blindness was brought to light.

In high school I made the mistake of assuming I understood God and God's will. My history teacher, Mr. Hutchinson (who would probably be my favorite teacher if I had to go back to high school), was just some crazy liberal. He would complain about Hershey's use of child labor or Walmart's mistreatment of employees. I wouldn't say I was apathetic, but I was blind to see where God's heart lay. The importance of social justice was not obvious to me. What else am I blind to? John Milton writes in Paradise Lost, "What in me is dark illumine, what is low raise and support."

An internal preparation is crucial, but must be accentuated in external action by the individual and community as a whole. How should we, as the community, respond to John's cry to, *Prepare the way of the Lord?*

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus shares with his disciples: *Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.* It is necessary that we recognize the Bethlehem child, the Christ, in all of these people.

How have we, as a nation, historically dealt with the stranger? In Douglas Massey's book, The Past and Future of Mexico-U.S. Migration, Massey explains that in 1907 the U.S. passed the Gentlemen's Agreement. This informal agreement said the U.S. would no longer impose restrictions on Japanese immigration, if Japan would agree to restrict further emigration into the U.S. This was beneficial for the U.S. because there would no longer be Japanese immigrants. 'Problem solved!' And it was beneficial for the Japanese because the U.S. agreed to avoid legal discrimination against Japanese people. This agreement led to labor shortages in the U.S., which resulted in a demand for Mexican labor under temporary workers programs. Fast forward to October 1929: the U.S. and the world undergo the Great Depression. From 1929-1939, 469,000 Mexicans were forcibly removed from the United States. Then 1941 marks the U.S. entrance into WWII. During WWII the U.S. was once again in the need of Mexican labor... This is only a small portion of the larger story that says that the other, the foreigner, the forgotten, are brought in when needed and expelled when not.

The story of a people displaced, used, and without a home is one familiar to the Judeo-Christian community. But how are we called to respond to the foreigner, the stranger? What is the Christian response? Yared Portillo writes, "Jesus says, 'I was a stranger and you took me in.' Not, 'I was a stranger and you took me in because you needed me.'"

And from Mother Teresa: "We are touching Christ's body in the poor. In the poor it is the hungry Christ we are feeding, it is the naked Christ that we are clothing, it is the homeless Christ we are giving shelter. It is not just hunger for bread or the need of the naked for clothes or of the homeless for a house made of bricks. Even the rich are hungry for love, for being cared for, for being wanted, for having someone to call their own."

As we prepare for the birth of the Bethlehem child let us acknowledge the inevitable change. Let us prepare to give our time, to give our homes, to give what is required. In June of 1855 the

Statue of Liberty arrived in New York Harbor, bearing the inscription of a poem by Emma Lazarus.

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Our preparation for Christ is one in which we make room in the community for the poor, the oppressed, the other and the forgotten. We make a way for them to flourish and a way for them to join the community—to “share in the joy received from the gospel.” Our scriptures do not give us the solution to the problems. It tells how we are to treat these people. It is a call to see the humanity and divinity reflected in all peoples.

I was one fortunate enough to grow up in a community of faith that expressed love, support, and comfort to one another. Granted, I have experienced limited loneliness, but never complete abandonment. Paul writes to the church of Philippi these words, which reflect my feelings for the community: *I thank God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.*

Philippians is one of Paul’s prison epistles. It is worth noting that Paul uses the word translated as “joy,” or a variation, 16 times in this short epistle. Paul’s joy could be misunderstood as a contradiction, due to Paul’s imprisonment. But this overwhelming joy that Paul is experienced is explained. Paul finds comfort through the enduring relationship between himself and the church of Philippi. It is an intimate and emotional letter clearly articulating the love shared between Paul and the community. This letter is a prime example of the tremendous comfort the community can bring. It is important to note Paul did not need to be physically present in the community to feel this joy. When I say ‘join the community’ I am not limiting this to physicality.

Now these scriptures together bring about both joy and sadness. Joy, as we look out and see the love of a community, and sadness, as we reflect upon those, known and unknown, experiencing loneliness or need.

Last Sunday Jim spoke prophetically about the peoples and groups we, the community, should make ready for—specifically, the Syrian refugees. We, the community, are called to do what others do not do. Now, this could mean preparing a place for refugees to be relocated in Greenville. Honestly, I am not sure exactly how it should all look, but this discernment is the

purpose of the community. And I thank God we are part of a community concerned with discerning these questions, one dedicated to raising these questions to find solutions.

We must continue to ask ourselves how else we should be preparing for the way of the Lord. How are we to work to remove the obstacles that obstruct people from experiencing the joy received from the community? We are John the Baptizer crying in the wilderness: *With the Spirit and power of Elijah [You] will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.* (Luke 1:17)

To prepare the way for the other is to be ready for the Messiah.

In the words of Mother Teresa's prayer: "You are the Beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased. You are the Son of Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit in her Virginal womb.

You were born in Bethlehem, wrapped in swaddling clothes by Mary and placed in a manger filled with straw. You are an ordinary man without much education, and the educated class in Israel judges you.

Jesus is: the Word made flesh,
the Bread of Life,
the victim immolated for our sins on the cross,
the sacrifice offered for the sins of the world
and for my sins in Holy Mass,
the Word to be proclaimed,
the Truth to be revealed,
the Way to be followed,
the Light to illumine,
the Life to live,
the Love to be loved,
the hungry person to be fed,
the thirsty person given drink,
the naked one to clothe,
the homeless to shelter,
the sick to be cured,
the abandoned to be loved,
the outcast to be welcomed,
the lepers whose wounds are bathed,
the beggar to whom a smile is given,
the drunkard who needs to be listened to,
the mentally disturbed who needs to be protected,
the infant who needs to be held in our arms,
the blind person who needs to be led by the hand,
the mute for whom someone must speak,
the crippled with whom one walks,
the drug addict who needs help,

the prostitute who needs to be taken off the streets and listened to,
the prisoner who needs to be visited,
the aged person who needs to be taken care of.”
Now, let us prepare the way of the Lord! Amen.